

Transitions to Adulthood: Experimental Evidence from a Conjoint Study

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Introduction

Across Europe, the path to adulthood has become increasingly uncertain and fragmented. Classical markers such as completing education, achieving stable employment, leaving the parental home, forming partnerships, and having children are now reached later, more unevenly, and less universally than in previous generations. This transformation raises questions about what it means to “be an adult” today and how this meaning differs across generations and welfare regimes.

This paper examines how individuals in different age groups and contexts conceptualize adulthood and how they weigh competing markers of independence, responsibility, and maturity. We use a **cross-national conjoint experiment** to be conducted in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Germany to identify which characteristics most strongly shape people’s judgments of whether an individual has “reached adulthood.”

The study contributes to life-course research by combining cross-generational comparison with an experimental design that captures multidimensional trade-offs in definitions of adulthood – an approach that moves beyond traditional single-item survey measures.

Research Questions and Contribution

We address four questions:

1. Which markers are most central to defining adulthood—education, employment, housing, partnership, or parenthood?
2. How do perceptions differ between younger (ages 18–30) and older (ages 48–60) generations?
3. How do welfare-state contexts shape adulthood norms?
4. Are there gender differences in how adulthood is defined?

Previous surveys, including the European Social Survey’s “Timing of Life” module, have measured age norms through direct questions but treated adulthood as a one-dimensional concept. The conjoint design allows us to evaluate **relative importance** across multiple attributes, identifying the implicit hierarchies of adulthood markers and their variation across countries, generations, and genders.

Background and Theoretical Motivation

The transition to adulthood (T2A) literature—spanning demography, sociology, and psychology – identifies three structural trends motivating this research:

1. **Postponement and diversification:** Marker events are increasingly delayed and de-sequenced, producing heterogeneous life courses and prolonged dependency well into the thirties.
2. **Welfare-state effects:** Early independence in the Nordic regimes contrasts with familistic patterns of Southern and Continental Europe, but rising housing costs and labour-market precarity are eroding the Nordic advantage, producing convergence in youth dependency.
3. **Intergenerational and gender divides:** Educational expansion has reshaped gender roles and value orientations, while wealth accumulation among older generations—especially through housing—has intensified youth dependence, altering intergenerational power relations.

Together, these developments raise the question of whether adulthood remains defined by economic and residential independence or has become a more subjective status grounded in emotional and psychological autonomy.

Methods

Data and Design

We conduct nationally representative online surveys in **five countries** (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Germany), with $\approx 3,000$ respondents per country. Samples are stratified into two cohorts (18–30 and 48–60 years), enabling cross-generational comparisons.

Experimental Setup

Each respondent evaluates ten paired vignettes describing hypothetical individuals that vary randomly across adulthood-related attributes. The attributes and levels are:

Attribute	Levels (examples)
Gender	Male / Female
Age	25 / 30 / 35
Education	Still in education / Completed education
Employment	Not working / Temporary / Permanent job
Partnership	Single / In relationship / Cohabiting / Married
Parenthood	Parent / Non-parent
Housing	Living with parents / Renting / Owning
Financial dependence	Receives parental support / Financially independent
Psychological independence	Struggles to make decisions / Confidently independent

Respondents rate each vignette on two scales:

1. “To what extent has this person reached adulthood?”
2. “How successfully has this person transitioned into adulthood?”

For the younger cohort, a follow-up question asks how these markers applied to their parents' generation; for the older cohort, how they perceive today's youth.

Analytical Strategy

We estimate **Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs)** (Hainmueller et al., 2014) to determine each attribute's contribution to perceived adulthood, with heterogeneity analysis across gender, age, and country. Randomization ensures causal identification and high internal validity.

Expected Findings

We anticipate that:

1. **Economic and housing independence** will be the strongest predictors of perceived adulthood.
2. **Partnership and parenthood** will have lost importance, indicating a shift toward individualized and subjective definitions of maturity.
3. **Generational contrasts** will emerge: older cohorts emphasize stability and family formation, younger cohorts highlight emotional and psychological autonomy.
4. **Gender differences** will persist: women place more weight on education and self-determination, men on financial autonomy.
5. **Cross-national variation** will reflect welfare contexts: Nordic respondents prioritize self-realization and equality, while German respondents stress employment and home ownership.

These findings will show whether adulthood remains tied to independence and productivity or has become a fluid social category shaped by context and perception.

Relevance and Policy Implications

Understanding how adulthood is defined and experienced is critical for policy in ageing and unequal societies. Structural barriers – unaffordable housing, job precarity, extended education – may be redefining what it means to become independent. Evidence from this study can inform:

- Youth and family policies promoting financial and residential independence,
- Measures to strengthen intergenerational fairness and solidarity,
- Gender-equitable pathways into stable employment, and
- Housing and education reforms enabling smoother life-course transitions.

By linking generational perspectives to welfare-state models, the study contributes to comparative research on youth autonomy, intergenerational relations, and demographic renewal in Europe.

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